Celebrations with a new life of rock and gospel singing

MUSIC WATCH: Navajiva and the Celebrant Singers

BY SANTOSH GNANAKAN

Bangalore has never had it so good. We've been to concerts ranging from *bhangra*-pop to jazz and from classical music to good ol' rock. It has truly been a feast. Two groups of differing styles were in town within the space of a week and we had the opportunity to not only listen to their music, but also talk to them.

The feedback from Amin Hammoudi's Fender Strat guitar screamed in defiance, as Max Antoni on the drums and Michael Roing on electric bass cranked their engines. The audience at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, not knowing what to expect, sat back in awe as **Navajiva** from Germany rocked and grooved. This was music with an attitude that Bangalore has rarely seen before. A change from the commercial stuff we tragically grow used to. "We don't play covers at our concerts," said guitarist and lead vocalist Amin before the show, "and this has helped our development as a band."

The search for the right-sounding band name often results in a weak attempt at sounding profound and trippy. Sometimes it works. "It was a coincidence, but 'Navajiva' sounded good and when we found out the meaning, we decided that this is it," recalls Amin. Playing together for a mere three years and yet able to sound so tight is quite an accomplishment for a young band. They've just finished recording their first album *Remote Controlled* (it's in English; they don't sing in German) which hasn't even been released yet.

"Jimi Hendrix is my all-time favourite guitar player," says Amin, as was evident from his controlled use of the wah wah. Roing's driving and involved bass work, along with Antoni's sheer brilliance on the drums provided the perfect foundation for funky guitar riffs. One doesn't normally associate the cello with rock music, but Claudia, the fourth member of the band brings completion to the sound of Navajiva. Claudia is a trained award-winning, classical musician and was playing for an orchestra before the call of the wild beckoned her. Navajiva's originality and attitude is a lesson for bands today. They've also got youth on their side — Amin and Roing are 23-years-old, while Antoni and Claudia are only 20.

Little Child had a Red Hot Chilli Peppers feel to it, while *Angel* (not intended to be a Hendrix tribute), *Space Cowboy, Just a Second* and the other songs Navajiva churned out showed elements of funk and rock.

Not wanting to be outdone, Bangalore's finest showed their true colours when members of the audience tried to get on stage during the show. One stoned individual earnestly requested a song by the *Doors*, while another presented Claudia with a flower. A few others tried to play the Germans' instruments. Nobody appeared to be in charge, nor did anybody appear to care and Amin's pleas to the more active members of the audience to restrain themselves fell on deaf ears.

Nevertheless, the music prevailed, before the cops arrived and drove everyone away. But the one question almost everyone had on their minds as they left was, "Where can I buy the Navajiva CD?"

Celebrating is a hectic business. Especially if you do it 11 months in a year. You could get tired, unless of course, you had a little help from above. California-based **Celebrant Singers** certainly do and they are busy sharing it with the world. No, this is not some small-town Christian choir, that your grandparents' mates sing for. This is a professional, dedicated and committed bunch of men and women who give 400 concerts a year. And the keyword here is commitment.

The Celebrant Singers were in Bangalore performing at various churches. Their repertoire consisted of original contemporary gospel music as well as new arrangements to old hymns. They had to make do with poor acoustics, but still managed to touch people's hearts.

COMMITTED TO SERVING THROUGH SONG: (Above) The 23 Celebrant Singers who are touring India. A photograph by V. Srinivas Murthy (Right) Navajiva, the rock group.

David Dick is the Team Director and this is his third visit to India. "The Celebrant Singers have performed in over 75 countries, 16 times in India," he says. "We are all committed to serving the Lord," says Dick. "God is the reason we do it," his wife, Bonnie adds.

Manjula, who sings with the Celebrants, is an Indian living in Canada. "I was a student before I joined. I wanted to use my talents to spread God's love," she says. Monica plays the trumpet and also was a student before joining.

There are 23 Celebrants — nine singers, 11 musicians, two technicians and one lady who communicates on stage through sign-language. The singers perform backed by a brass band, as well as drums and keyboards.

This ministry through music was started way back in 1977 when founder-president Jon Stemkoski realised how powerful a tool music could be to spread the message of love.

India was the first country the early Celebrant Singers visited outside of North America in 1978 and still remains a special place to visit.

"Everyone is excited about coming to India and the response here is better than anywhere else," says Dick. "On my second visit to India, I fell sick and had to return to the US. I was paralysed!" he adds. But that didn't stop him and the others, and won't, from returning to India, "This is like our second home."